Australia and the East Asian Summit: Howard's diplomatic "success" turns sour

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April should have seen a series of diplomatic triumphs for Australian Prime Minister John Howard. Early in the month, Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono arrived in Canberra—just the third visit in 30 years by an Indonesian head of state. Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi followed—the first such trip to Australia in more than 20 years—and signed an agreement to start negotiations for a free trade agreement between the two countries.

The Australian prime minister then set out on a tour of North East Asia to China and Japan. The high point of the trip was the signing of an agreement on April 18 to begin talks on a free trade deal with China—one of Australia's most important and fastest growing trading partners. Moreover, he managed to avoid any obvious diplomatic blunders over the sensitive issue of Taiwan or tensions between Tokyo and Beijing over anti-Japanese protests in China by adopting the expedient tactic of saying little or nothing.

Nevertheless, a gathering political cloud has overshadowed these diplomatic successes. The failure of the Howard government to receive an invitation to the inaugural East Asia Summit to be held in November in Kuala Lumpur is threatening Canberra's ambitions to enhance the economic and political position of Australian capitalism in the region. The issue raises the basic dilemma confronting the Australian bourgeoisie since the end of the Cold War: what course to steer amid growing great power rivalry between its longtime strategic ally—the US—and its major economic partners in Asia—Japan and now China?

Howard's answer has been to unequivocally back the Bush administration's "war on terrorism", in return for Washington's support in the Asia-Pacific region. The tactic appeared to have some success. In the wake of the 2003 Iraq invasion, Australia has tightened its grip over neighbouring tiny Pacific Island states: bullying country after country into accepting Australian "advisors" in top administration posts. With US backing, Howard has attempted to broaden Australia's role in Asia. He attended the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit for the first time last November.

But appearances are deceptive. Canberra's wholehearted support for US militarism has generated concerns, fears and resentments in ruling circles throughout the region. Howard provoked sharp opposition in Asian capitals last year by enunciating his own version of the Bush doctrine of preventative war—that Australia was prepared to unilaterally conduct preemptive strikes against "terrorist threats" in the region. Confident that he could push his way into the East Asian Summit, Howard flatly dismissed appeals at last year's ASEAN meeting to sign the grouping's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation.

The issue reemerged last month. During his visit, Yudhoyono gave Indonesia's backing for an Australian seat at the East Asian Summit, declaring Jakarta would be "a bridge" between Australia and Asia. But Abdullah sidestepped the issue, refusing to give unequivocal support. Shortly after, to Howard's consternation, a meeting of ASEAN foreign ministers made adherence to the Amity Treaty mandatory for a summit seat. The move was obviously directed at Australia: the only potential invitee that had not signed.

During his trip to China, Howard attempted to get Beijing's support but without success: the best that he could claim was that "positive remarks" were made in private conversations with Chinese leaders. In Japan, which previously publicly backed Australian attendance at the summit, he played down the whole issue, declaring that the summit "was not the most important thing" in Australia's relations with Asia. Worse was to come, however.

Howard returned to China to attend the Bo'ao economic forum, where the Malaysian prime minister was given the floor on April 23 to deliver a humiliating lecture to Howard. In front of 1,000 assembled Asian leaders, corporate chiefs and other dignitaries, Abdullah declared that the Amity Treaty was "fundamental to the interests and well-being of the East Asian Community. It is also why [ASEAN] insists that accession to the treaty is absolutely indispensable for participation in the East Asia summit.

"No country in the world that does not wish any harm to the countries of the region should have any difficulty in acceding to the treaty. All the treaty obliges of them is to adopt peaceful methods of resolving conflicts and live in peace and harmony with the countries of the region. It does not oblige them to relinquish any defence treaty or terminate any alliance that they may have with other states."

Superficially, these events might seem a relatively trivial diplomatic issue. The 1976 Amity Treaty was drawn up as the basis for reinvigorating the largely defunct ASEAN grouping as an anti-communist bulwark following American imperialism's devastating defeat in Vietnam. The founding collection of right-wing regimes and military dictatorships insisted on the principle of "non-interference" in the internal affairs of members so that their practices would not be subject to outside scrutiny and criticism.

As Abdullah indicated in China, the Amity Treaty is full of high blown diplomatic language, which commits its signatories to very little. It is, however, incompatible with Howard's determination to publicly assert an Australian "right" to take unilateral, preemptive action with the region.

In an editorial on April 8 firmly backing Howard's refusal to sign, Murdoch's *Australian* pointed out that definite interests were at stake. "[While] the summit could develop into a trading power to rival the US and EU, we should not do anything rash in order to be accepted," the newspaper declared. "That includes signing ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, which sounds innocuous enough but would have put the kybosh on our East Timor intervention."

As far as Murdoch and the Australian bourgeoisie are concerned, East Timor was a resounding success. Under the guise of humanitarianism, Canberra has through its 1999 military intervention secured a long-held ambition: to control the Timor Sea oil and gas reserves. Howard's preemptive doctrine extends the scope for new Australian military adventures in the region—either alone, or more likely, in concert with the US. ASEAN countries are clearly seeking to prevent that.

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Of course, if Washington's own relations in Asia were smooth, there would be no difficulty. But the very emergence of "a trading power to rival the US and EU" underlines the rising tensions and potential conflicts internationally and in the region.

ASEAN's decision to establish a broader forum that included China, Japan and South Korea—the so-called ASEAN+3—and to initiate the East Asian Summit stem from the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis. The region's ruling elites bitterly resented the way in which Washington and the IMF exploited the crisis to impose longstanding demands for economic restructuring with scant regard for the political, economic and social consequences. The East Asian Summit, which will not include the US, is an attempt to secure the interests of Asia's capitalist classes against their rivals.

The East Asian Summit poses a dilemma not only for the Howard government, but the Australian ruling class as a whole. It is possible that an Asian economic bloc, which is riven with competing interests, will not succeed in getting off the ground. Australian capitalism, however, which has huge economic interests at stake in Asia, cannot afford to sit back and wait. As economic commentators have pointed out, Australian business has to be in on the ground floor.

Howard's attempts to gain an invitation, while refusing to sign the Amity Treaty, have obviously hit a stone wall. And the prospect that Australia may be left out in the cold has produced an astonishing back flip on the part of Murdoch's *Australian*. In the space of less than a month, it has gone from urging Howard not to sign the Amity Treaty to lecturing the prime minister over his foreign policy flaws and declaring that he must back down to secure a spot at the East Asian Summit.

The newspaper's chief political reporter Steve Lewis initiated the campaign with a comment on April 26 entitled "Hardline Howard must back down". After reviewing prime minister's embarrassment at the Bo'ao gathering in China, the article berated Howard for his "ridiculously hardline stance" on the Amity Treaty and concluded: "Australia's long-term interests will be served if he pulls out the Mont Blanc [pen] and signs the damned treaty. Even if, as the Chinese say, it means losing face."

And in case the message did not register, the *Australian's* editor-at-large, Paul Kelly, weighed in the following day with a further comment entitled "Howard taught a lesson in Asia". Studiously ignoring all the *Australian* has previously written on the subject, Kelly lashed Howard for "seriously mishandling the issue", for believing that he could dictate the terms of Australia's engagement with Asia, for his "highly irresponsible statement" on military pre-emption, and for misreading "the role of the treaty, the mood of the region, and possibly, the importance for Australia of the East Asia summit."

Kelly bluntly told Howard that his task was to negotiate a foundation seat at the summit in return for signing the Amity Treaty. "No other result satisfies the national interest. The summit is likely to evolve as the principal economic and political decision making body for East Asia. The Lowry Institute's Alan Dupont says: 'This could be a seminal event for Australia's engagement with Asia and it is critical that Australia be involved from the start.'"

There is every sign that Howard has heard his master's voice loud and clear. The first leaks have already appeared in the press hinting that Canberra is preparing to do an about face and sign the treaty. Like Japan, it could insist that arrangement not compromise its strategic obligations to the US military alliance. Such an outcome, however, would only pose new difficulties.

It is unlikely that Washington is going to passively sit by and watch the emergence of a powerful economic rival in Asia, particularly one in which China plays a significant role. The Bush administration has made no secret of the fact that it opposes China's growing influence in South East Asia. A White House official, for instance, told the *Sydney Morning Herald* last year that Beijing was trying to turn the ASEAN+3 into "a plaything of the Chinese". At some point, probably sooner rather than later, Washington is likely to intervene, putting Canberra in the uncomfortable position of having to choose sides.

Canberra is already at odds with Washington over Taiwan and Australia's support for EU plans to lift its arms embargo on China. In a comment entitled "Howard's Asian balancing act" on April 13, Hugh White, who as director of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute helped formulate Howard's foreign policy, warned: "Our alliance with the US is facing a big test. Australia's support in Iraq now attracts less attention in Washington than our growing political alignment with China, and George Bush's team is wondering what to do about it."

The comment referred to a recent speech by Howard elaborating the view that Australia could continue to balance between the US and China because confrontation between the two was not inevitable. But as White put it: "The hard men in the Bush administration do not see it that way. They regard China as America's most important long-term strategic competitor."

White warned that Washington could easily put Canberra to the test by insisting at ministerial talks later this year on a joint communiqué declaring Taiwan to be a matter of mutual strategic concern. Such a statement would immediately sour relations with Beijing, which regards Taiwan as a renegade province and its affairs as an internal Chinese matter. The repercussions could be very damaging: the scuttling of any Australia-China free trade agreement and a Chinese veto on an Australian seat at the East Asia Summit.

But as White pointed out the alternative is no more palatable. "[S]tiff-arming our major ally on this core strategic issue would carry big costs too. The Bush administration is unforgiving with those who do not support it on key issues. Suddenly Australia faces a rather stark choice." Significantly, he had nothing much to offer by way of advice other than to adopt "a more active, imaginative, and effective diplomacy".

The conundrums facing the Australian bourgeoisie are a sign of the times. The Howard government is not alone in facing unpalatable choices—each with potentially disastrous consequences. The collapse of the Cold War framework has not led to a new era of peace and prosperity, but to an increasingly desperate struggle by each capitalist nation state to secure its interests at the expense of its rivals—a process that leads inexorably towards conflict and war.

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